

A HISTORY OF VZ USER GROUPS IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND.

by Bob Kitch.

The first advertisement for the sale of DSE's VZ-200 computer was in Electronics Australia June 1983. That is a long while ago, particularly in computing terms, for a small and cheap 8-bit computer to survive. Since that time many people have purchased and used the VZ-200, and its upgrade in July 1985, the VZ-300. Users and owners of the VZ naturally tended to band together, to chew over mutual interests and problems, in much the same way as owners of other "breeds" of computers. These "jam" sessions were most often held over the phone, but have you ever tried to satisfactorily discuss a software problem over the phone? The next stage was to organize a meeting of interested enthusiasts, usually on a week-end, in someones home or at a conveniently located hall. And so began "A VZ USER GROUP".

The VZ was greatly assisted by its origins. The VZ was really a souped-up Tandy TRS-80 or its clone, the DSE System-80. These two machines were based on a Zilog Z-80 microprocessor and held a version of Microsoft BASIC in ROM. (this is what gives a microcomputer its distinctive personality) These machines were responsible for the commencement of the home and personal computing boom - no small claim. In 1983, the VZ-200, manufactured by Video Technology in Hong Kong, used an improved version of the Microsoft ROM, offered colour and sound, increased memory capacity and a low price. A lot of TRS-80 and Sytem-80 owners upgraded to the VZ. These guys often knew Z-80 Assembler and the workings of the Level II ROM backwards! They also bought a useful software base to the VZ.

The VZ computer quickly gained a large following and was clearly a marketting success for DSE. They claim to have sold in excess of 30,000 VZ-200. DSE's support for the VZ was often found wanting - a very common moan amongst Users. The various User Groups that sprang into existence provided the essential support for the VZ. Without them, the VZ and its Users would have probably withered away and gone the way a number of other small computers did.

User Groups usually have a small band of committed enthusiasts, who tend to carry the activities of the Group. They provide the core of knowledge that, unites the group, fascinates and nurtures the uninitiated to computing and possess a restlessness to achieve more with the VZ. Their reward seems to be simply seeing a new member become a successful User. A fairly natural activity to flow from this Group, is the production of a newsletter, to serve far-flung enthusiasts (remember the telephone) and to record discoveries (be they hardware tricks or new programs) for other Users.

A newsletter needs an Editor. These fellows are the greatest. Their contribution to VZ computing and the Users is huge. The amount of information recorded in User Groups Newsletters is staggering. Some of you may be aware of the magazine article, books and software lists that are available. A similar list of User Groups and their Newsletters is in preparation. Your assistance in adding to it would be appreciated.

With this background then, I provide a brief discussion of the VZ User Group Newsletters with which I am familiar. I apologize for any omissions, but would appreciate being made aware of any shortcomings.

1. DSE EFFORTS.

Undoubtedly, DSE's was aware of its poor support for the VZ - we told them often enough! They had also engaged the prolific Tim Hartnell to write a series of books for the VZ. Tim commenced the first VZ-200 User Group in mid-1983. He produced 3 editions of "VZ-200 Interface" - the Official Magazine of the VZ200 Users' Club. The last edition (#3) was issued around Easter 1984. Each edition was around 8 pages and filled with hints, Basic programs and DSE advertisements.

(As a sad aside, at the time of writing - February 1991 - I noticed in a recent paper that Tim Hartnell had succumbed to cancer and passed away aged 40. Tim was a significant contributor to the VZ with his VZ-200 and VZ-300 books.)

By mid-1984 other "private" User Groups had begun to form. DSE's dropped "Interface" and began producing "Comput", a newsletter covering other machines sold by DSE. Five editions were erratically produced from August 1984 to July 1986. Minor articles on the VZ are included.

I should mention here, for completeness, that DSE's Annual Catalogue since 1983 has contained VZ information. The release of software and hardware items can be tracked through these.

2. THE FIRST USER GROUP CLUB.

Who said that Victorians couldn't read? In early 1984, Mr. Luigi Chiodo produced the first edition of "Output". He subsequently changed the name to "Visual Display Unit". I do not have a full set of his newsletters. I have #1 - #7. How many did Luigi produce? They contain a considerable amount of DSE supplied material as well as some other interesting contributions.

3. THE FIRST QUEENSLAND CLUB.

The first "private" VZ users group newsletter was produced by Mr. John D'Alton in June 1984. John went on to produce 27 issues of "LE'VZ News" with the last in May 1990. A monumental effort by John, particularly when considered with his software support, program writing and Christmas Meetings. In addition to the newsletter, John produced a book on programming hints and hardware. This is a most valuable and well produced set of newsletters and most are still available from John as back issues.

4. A GROUP IN ADELAIDE.

In July 1984, Mr. John Waters of Cheltenham in Adelaide produced the first edition of "Ve Zee News". John (perhaps wisely!) initially said that he would only produce 12 newsletters. True to his word, he produced 12 monthly editions from July 1984 to June 1985. His newsletters contain a lot of "meaty" information on the VZ. I suspect that a number of the contributors were ex-TRS-80 men. "Ve Zee News" is an excellent collection of newsletters and contains hardware modifications and software listings.

5. ACROSS THE TASMAN.

The VZ was sold by DSE stores in New Zealand and in July 1984 a user group commenced in Christchurch. They produced a "Christchurch VZ User Group Newsletter" on a monthly basis up until April 1988 when interest waned. Their newsletters are full of Basic programs and are very chatty with details of their regular monthly meetings.

6. LYSCO FROM WA.

The Leon Young Software Company sprang up in Perth in late 1984. (Actual dates are uncertain as Leon did not date his newsletters.) He also supported the Amstrad and Commodore computers. Leon's Newsletters and Catalogs were fairly informal notes but contained a number of useful tips on the VZ as well as advertisements for his software. I have about 10 newsletters in all dated around November 1984 to his wind-up in July 1986.

7. ANOTHER IN NZ.

In December 1984 another user group was underway in Auckland, New Zealand. They produced "XILOG The Microcomputer Magazine for VZ200, VZ300 and Aquarius Users" - suggesting their ties with DSE. I have an incomplete set of XILOG but it is full of interesting snippets for the VZ user. My last edition is #8 dated August 1985. Does anyone know any more about this club?

8. OUT WEST IN NSW.

Also in late 1984, Mr. Rick Swancott organized a small user group in the western suburbs of Sydney. They produced 2 small newsletters around December 1984, entitled "Out West VZ-200 User Group". It was filled with Basic games.

9. FROM THE TROPICS..

I first corresponded with Mr. Gordon Browell in Darwin in late 1985. Gordon was running the "Ad Lib VeeZee Micro Club". He produced informal notes and programs and freely circulated these to any interested correspondents. The informality of this arrangement subsequently resulted in his production of two excellent beginners series. The first was "Micro Magic - Beginners Guide to the Vee Zed" in 6 parts, and the second was "Studio Ad Lib - Micro Magic Workshop" also in 6 parts. They are excellently written and produced series.

Somewhere around 1985, Gordon moved to Biggenden in south-east Queensland but unfortunately he has more recently become involved in other computers.

10. ANOTHER BRISBANE GROUP.

Mr. Michael Novakovic, a secondary student at the time, and living at Goodna, A western suburb of Brisbane, produced 4 newsletters. It was called "VZCOMPU200/300" and ran from December 1985 to April 1986. Michael experimented with machine code and POKE's to the communication region!

11. YET ANOTHER IN NSW.

In January 1986, Mr. Mark Harwood published the first edition of "VZ User". He produced 22 issues and finished in September 1988. Mark was a Tertiary student undertaking Electrical Engineering studies. His newsletter contained a number of in-depth features on the VZ. He also gave an introduction to VZDOS-in-ROM that has not been bettered elsewhere. Mark also developed some excellent software in conjunction with Gavin Williamson of Laserlink.

12. ANOTHER NSW CLUB.

The Hunter Valley Region of NSW has been well served since June 1986 by the "Hunter Valley VZ Users Group Newsletter" (now Journal). Mr Gavin Williamson produced the first 6 newsletters but Mr. Joe Leon

has produced up to the current edition #32. This newsletter is still underway and is produced bi-monthly. The newsletters are consistently packed with programs and hardware modifications.

13. AND BACK TO VICTORIA.

Scott Le Brun was a very prolific writer of adventure games for the VZ. In August 1986 he began publication of "VeeZed Down Under". Scott also ran monthly meetings from his home. Scott produced 13 editions before the illustrious Harry Huggins took over in September 1988. Harry has since produced number 28 and is still going strong. Harry has also acquired the remaining VZ hardware from DSE. If you are ever passing through Melbourne, plan to spend an evening with Harry.

14. ANOTHER AUCKLAND CLUB.

In October 1986 Peter Hill commenced the Auckland VZ300/200 Users Club. Since that time peter has produced on a monthly basis a creditable 50 editions of "VZ-Link". The Auckland Club is still going strong and has a monthly meeting in the city - afternoon tea and a cuppa provided.

15. AN INFORMAL BRISBANE GROUP.

A group of enthusiasts in Brisbane decided to hold monthly meetings without producing a newsletter as, at the time, John D'Alton was carrying out this function. This group meets on the first Saturday of each month at Stan Noble's house. This group is evolving towards a computer interest group as most of the members have now purchased PC's. The VZ still gets a hammering and some new-comers regularly appear.

16. A NEW INNOVATION.

Last year Jason Oakley of Sapphire Productions produced 2 editions of his excellent "DiskMag". This is a magazine on disk for the VZ. Jason needs all the support he can get to continue his efforts.

THE AUCKLAND VZ-200 USERS GROUP:
President, Julian Bish,
22 Ussher Place, Pakuranga. Phone. Auckland
562-166.

VZ-200 USERS GROUP -
Contact: Petor Cox, Ph 435-126 after 4pm
or write to Peter Cox. 9 Cranby St, Orekawa, Napier.

CHRISTCHURCH VZ-200 USERS GROUP: Meets second
Tuesday of month. Contact Ian Birse. Ph 523-915.
Graham Dillon, Ph 324-117, or P.O. Box 22-094.
Christchurch 1.